

**How to Help Divorced and Blended Families Through the B'nei  
Mitzvah Process**

**Capstone Project for Master in Religious Education**

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## Outline of the Unit

1. Judaism and Divorce – This lesson focuses on Deuteronomy 24:1-4 which is the basis for Jewish divorce laws.
2. God and the Israelites – This lesson looks at the relationship between God and the Israelites as a marriage.
3. Using The Get for Ritual Closure – This lesson attempts to help parents to find closure.
4. The Child – through personal stories and art this lesson identifies some of the feelings the child may be having.
5. Negotiating the Family – This lesson explores the issues families face such as assigning honors and seating.
6. The Parents – How can the clergy and educators help the parents to focus their attention on the child rather than the strife between them.

### Rationale for unit:

This curriculum is for clergy, religious school educators and B'nei Mitzvah tutors to enable them to explore the intricacies of divorced and blended families in order to better guide them through the difficulties that can arise around these transitional moments. Unfortunately, according to statistics the divorce rate among Jewish families is as high as 30% and climbing<sup>1</sup>.

While it seems that divorce holds less of a stigma today than it once did, congregations send a clear and distinct message to congregants when they address an envelope to a divorced woman and use Mrs., or send mail to only one parent's home after being asked several times to send it to both the mother's and father's home. Rabbi Sanford Seltzer notes: "Religious school enrollment forms (often) do not ask for the names and addresses of both the custodial and the noncustodial parents."<sup>2</sup>

There are few, if any, published resources to help guide these families through Jewish ritual or life cycle events. According to Leila Herman Perlmutter, a case worker for the Jewish Board of Family and Children's services, "whatever negative feelings exist in either or both families once a couple has divorced and remarried can be expected to emerge during the times of ritual transition of their mutual child".<sup>1</sup> We are doing a disservice to these families by ignoring the hardships that come with the Bar/Bat Mitzvah times for them and assuming it is as simple as for nuclear families.

If Judaism is supposed to help Jews through the journey of life, then Judaism needs to help those in "unconventional" families as well as those in nuclear families. These families need

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.religioustolerance.org/chr\\_dira.htm](http://www.religioustolerance.org/chr_dira.htm)

<sup>2</sup> Seltzer, Rabbi Sanford. *When there is no other Alternative: A Spiritual Guide for Jewish Couples Contemplating Divorce*. UAH Press. New York:2000. xv

to be brought into the community and guided by Jewish text and tradition on how to relate to each other.

Judaism has much to say about divorce and the relationships following divorce proceedings. This repository of wisdom, along with information about family systems and child development, are integral to provide to clergy and youth educators in order for them to guide families through these events in a successful way, showing them how to live divorced in a Jewish manner and deepening their connection to Judaism. This curricular module is an attempt to fill a very specific need, I.E. to enable Jewish leaders to interact effectively with B'nei and B'not Mitzvah whose parents are divorced. In addition, by forming deeper emotional and spiritual connections to Judaism in a reform setting, they will form a deeper connection and commitment to Reform Judaism.

By ignoring the issues that divorced families have we add to the alienation that parents and students feel in school, at work, or in the synagogue. Seltzer notes that many children “believe that they do not belong or are uncertain about their status and their acceptance (in the synagogue) now that their family of origin has been restructured”.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Seltzer. Xvi.

## Letter to Teachers

The curricular module you are about to engage in broaches a challenging subject matter for many of us, but it operates under the assumption that divorce is affecting many families in our congregations and that they may very well require special attention. This curriculum has the potential to cause conflict among learners. The facilitator must be sure the learners are prepared to engage in these sessions. It is essential that learners are open-minded and willing to take risks both professionally and personally. This curriculum requires participants to share their thoughts and feelings. Please be sure the conversation takes place in a safe environment. The participants need to feel comfortable with each other, and must be willing to openly share their ideas. Facilitators can enable this by setting up ground rules at the beginning of the module. Each facilitator will need to choose the guidelines that work best for him/her. Some suggestions include: Everything discussed in the session, stays in the session; No one may interrupt another person; Disagreements must be posed in “I” statements to ensure no person attacks another’s ideas or feelings; Everyone will be given a chance to share.

In addition, it must be noted that every couple’s divorce is different. Every family has their own way of navigating the difficult territory of divorce and blended families. Some families do this with less conflict, while others have more. This curriculum is meant to be a guideline for clergy and educators. My hope is that it will help them look at divorce from different perspectives and enable them to use Jewish text and tradition to teach and inspire families. This module is written from the perspective of a Rabbi. Therefore, I would strongly encourage clergy and educators to establish a relationship with a local social worker who can advise them and assist in particularly difficult cases. The facilitator of this module may also

want to invite a social worker or psychologist to meet with the participants to address some of the issues that are beyond the scope of this curriculum, such as the social and emotional impact of divorce and blended families on teens and parents, especially when there is abuse involved.

I truly hope that you find this curriculum to be engaging. I hope that it will help all to gain a new perspective on the various challenges facing divorced families during this life-cycle event. Please keep an open mind and heart!

Mission of the Union for Reform Judaism:

To provide vision, leadership and programmatic support to Reform Jewish congregations and to perpetuate and advance Reform Judaism

Priority Goal:

To assist Rabbis, Cantors and Jewish Educators in helping diverse family systems through life cycle events in order to strengthen the family bond and the family tie to Judaism.

Age group:

This curriculum is for clergy, religious school educators and B'nei Mitzvah tutors to enable them to explore the intricacies of divorced and blended families in order to better guide them through the difficulties that can arise around these transitional moments.

Organizational setting:

The Union for Reform Judaism has many resources to assist synagogues, youth educators and camp directors in their various endeavors. I see this as a curriculum they would print and send to those who work with families or youth around the time of Bar/Bat Mitzvah. This could be done by a clergy team, at a series of staff meetings in a synagogue, or self-guided between chevruta partners. I recommend that this not be studied alone.

Enduring Understandings:

1. Learners will understand that Jewish tradition and law accept divorce, as it understands that some marriages end in divorce.
2. Learners will understand that families can find understanding and acceptance during difficult moments of their life through the examination, interpretation, internalization of Jewish texts, traditions, and teachings.

3. Learners will understand that Jewish rituals can be difficult for divorced and blended families, but through proper engagement thoughtful Jewish leaders can open doors to deep connections.
4. Learners will understand that blended and divorced families need guidance from Jewish leaders through these times of ritual transformation in order to ensure a positive experience and enduring connection.

#### Essential Questions:

1. How does Judaism's view of divorce affect our synagogue families?
2. How does a divorced family have a successful family experience, especially when there may be tension members of the nuclear or extended family?
3. How can the Jewish leader ensure a positive experience and enduring connection for these families?

#### Learner Outcomes:

At the end of these lessons learners will understand the Jewish laws and rituals around divorce. They will also know the Torah texts that support these laws and rituals and be able to use them to counsel families. In this way they will help families have a successful Bar/Bat Mitzvah experience. Learners will also be more open to families of many configurations helping them to feel welcome in the synagogue.



# Lesson One: Judaism and Divorce

## Essential Questions:

1. What about our previous experiences with divorced families has brought us to engage in this seminar?
2. How can Jewish law and tradition guide our thinking about divorced families?

## Core Concepts:

In preparation for counseling divorced and blended families, learners will explore the Torah's mention of divorce and Talmudic laws around divorce.

## Materials:

Big board or paper  
Journals  
Pens

## Activities:

1. Introduction (**3 min**)
  - a. Welcome to this seminar on how to help divorced families through the Bar/Bat Mitzvah process. Over the next few months we will study texts and Jewish tradition as well as discuss our own experiences and experiment with different techniques on how to counsel these families. We will meet with professionals as well as hear from families affected by divorce.
2. Initial Introductions (**3 min/person**)
  - a. Ask everyone in attendance to share stories of situations they have encountered of divorced families and the special circumstances the families encountered as they prepared for the child's bar/bat mitzvah.
3. Reflection (**10 min**)
  - a. Now have each participant reflect on the situation s/he shared in the above discussion.
  - b. Pass out the journals and have each participant write the situation in the journal, the way in which s/he dealt with the situation and his/her feelings about the way the situation played out. Have the participant write what s/he thought s/he did well and on what s/he could improve.
4. Text (**25 minutes**)
  - a. We all come to this with talents and strategies. The purpose of this course is going to be to learn more tools and texts to help support us in our work. We will

begin with the Torah text on divorce and the laws that are derived from this to see what we can learn to help us in our counseling.

- b. Pass out the Torah text the Talmud divorce laws are based on – see Appendix A
    - i. This discussion can be done in a group or in *chevruta* depending on the size.
  - c. Once everyone has taken time to discuss the text come together to hear different interpretations – see Appendix B
    - i. After hearing what the rabbis said, would you change any of your answers to the text study?
    - ii. Does this in any way effect your feelings about divorce?
    - iii. Do you think that this text and debate could help a divorced couple struggling with their new status? Why or why not?
5. Reevaluating Situation (**15 min**)
- a. Have each participant take time to reflect on the situation s/he described earlier and the way in which s/he handled the situation.
  - b. Have each participant write in their journal if there is anything s/he would do differently with his/her current knowledge
  - c. Give participants a chance to share if they choose
6. Closure (**15 min**)
- a. Join together
  - b. Have everyone share one thing they will take with them and try to use before the next class.
  - c. Encourage people to write down how they have used this technique and its success rate to bring back and share with us next time.
7. Hint to next class
- a. In the next lesson we will be speaking further about the relationship between the former husband and wife!

## Appendix A

### Text Study

Deuteronomy 24:1-4 reads:

When a man takes a wife and marries her, then it comes to pass, if she does not find favor in his eyes, because he has found some unseemly thing in her, then he can write her a bill of divorcement and give it to her hand and send her out of his house and she leaves his house and goes and becomes another man's wife, and the later husband hates her and writes her a bill of divorcement, and gives it in her hand and sends her out of his house; or if that latter husband dies, who took her to be his wife; her former husband, who sent her away, may not take her again to be his wife, after that she is defiled; for that is abomination before God.

Questions for Study:

1. Based on this text what do you extrapolate is Judaism's view on divorce?
2. Under what ground would you say a couple may be divorced?
3. The rabbis had a difficult time interpreting the word "unseemly". How would you interpret it?

There is a second text that speaks of divorce in the *Tanach*:

Malachi 2:16 reads: "I detest divorce."

Question for Study:

1. In relation to the above quote how would you interpret this text?

## Appendix B

### Debrief of the Above texts

Rabbi Perry Netter on the Malachi quote:

“When taken in context, what the prophet is talking about in this section is not a blanket condemnation of the institution of divorce. Instead, Malachi delivers a blistering rebuke of Israelite men who divorced their Israelite wives, the wives of their youths, and married non-Israelite women.”<sup>4</sup>

Interpretations of “unseemly”:

1. According to the House of Shammai this statement, *ervat davar*, means “appearance of sexual infidelity”.
  - Shammai says that the suspicion of adultery on the part of the wife is the only grounds for the dissolution of a marriage in Jewish law.
2. The house of Hillel felt that a person could get divorced for any, but a man needed to have a reason.<sup>5</sup>
  - Judith Hauptman agrees that “the association would imply that he dismisses her because he finds her sexually promiscuous. But the phrase could also mean “obnoxious thing” as it does elsewhere”.<sup>6</sup>
3. Rabbi Akiba sees the phrase in more lenient terms.
  - He feels that people should be allowed to divorce if there are not happy with each other.
    - “It is cruel to require a husband and wife to live in a loveless marriage and Rabbi Akiba does not require it.”

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<sup>4</sup> Netter, Rabbi Perry. *Divorce is a Mitzvah*. Jewish Lights. Woodstock, Vermont:2002. 69

<sup>5</sup> Hauptman 102

<sup>6</sup> Hauptman, Judith. *Rereading the Rabbis: A Woman's Voice*. Judith Hauptman. Westview:USA. 1998. 103.



## Lesson Two: God and the Israelites

### Essential Questions:

1. What can be learned about marriage and divorce from God's relationship with the Israelites in the Tanach?
2. How can we use these lessons when we counsel divorced and blended families?

### Core Concepts:

Through exploration of Jeremiah 2:2 and the relationship between God and the Israelites it portrays, learners will gain tools for helping divorced couples find ways to interacting with each other.

### Materials

Tanach for each participant

### Activities

1. Biblical Text (**30 min**)
  - a. Jeremiah 2:2: "I accounted to your favor the devotion of your youth, your love as a bride – how you followed me in the wilderness, in a land not sown."
    - i. Who is this about?
      1. Traditionally God and the Israelites are seen as being married
        - a. Rabbi Perry Netter goes on to say that Mount Sinai is the huppah for their (our) wedding and the Torah is the kettuba. The wandering in the wilderness is the honeymoon and our settling in Israel is the building of a marriage. During the marriage Israel "whored after other Gods" and there were consequences such as the destruction of the first Temple and the exile which Netter purposes was a separation. But, there was also forgiveness and reconciliation.<sup>7</sup>
      2. Let us look into these texts more carefully
        - a. Exodus 19:10-19 for the Chuppah
          - i. The *midrashim* on *Matan Torah* (the giving of the Torah) compare the arrival of *B'nei Yisrael* at Mt. Sinai, to the arrival of the kallah at her huppah. Exodus 19:17 reads "Moshe took the nation out of the camp to meet [likrat] God." On the words "to

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<sup>7</sup> Netter, Rabbi Perry. Pg. 50-51

meet," the midrash says that Moshe told B'nei Yisrael to leave the camp and go to the mountain because God, the hatan, is waiting to meet the people, his kallah, so that He may accompany them into the huppah.<sup>8</sup>

- ii. We see that the people need to be purified before they go to meet God. This can be compared to the tradition where the bride and groom do not see each other for a week before the wedding and with their going to the mikvah.
    - b. Exodus 34:10-11 and Exodus 24:7 on the Kettubah and agreeing to the kettubah
    - c. Joshua 1:1-8 on settling into married life
      - i. Laws to follow and the things that we want to leave for children
    - d. Judges 2:11-23
      - i. The Israelites are dissatisfied in their marriages and turn to other gods. God gives many chances for their return
  - 3. How can we use this description of the relationship between God and the Israelites to help families who have not forgiven or reconciled with each other and therefore are not able to be civil with each other?
    - a. We must understand that all couples will not be able to forgive, but they may be able to come to a point of civility
2. Role Play (30 min)
- a. More often than not, in a couple, one person is the moving force behind a divorce
    - i. Therefore one spouse may feel left or betrayed
    - ii. One spouse may still feel connected to the other spouse as a partner
    - iii. One spouse may feel the other is not involved
    - iv. One spouse may feel resentful that the other is re-married, regardless of whether the spouse is remarried
  - b. These are all issues to think about when a divorced family enters your office. Below you will find some scenarios with which you may be confronted.
    - 1. A divorced couple enters your office. They have been separated for five years. They are coming to you because they are unable to negotiate who will have their child during different parts of the weekend.
      - a. Please role play the clergy member or educator with whom they are meeting and the husband and wife. If this is being done in a *chevruta* setting then role play the clergy member meeting first with the wife and then with the husband.

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<sup>8</sup>[http://www.myjewishlearning.com/Life/Life\\_Events/Weddings/Liturgy\\_Ritual\\_and\\_Custom/Huppah/symbolism\\_of\\_huppah.shtml](http://www.myjewishlearning.com/Life/Life_Events/Weddings/Liturgy_Ritual_and_Custom/Huppah/symbolism_of_huppah.shtml)

- b. If there are enough people to observe, please have them comment on what they saw after the role play
  - c. If there are no observers, then once you are done with the role play, step out of your roles and discuss the following questions
    - i. What did it feel like to play your role?
    - ii. What did it feel like to hear from the other person?
    - iii. For those playing the parents – did you feel the clergy member/educator was hearing your feelings?
    - iv. What would you have liked to hear from him/her that you did not?
    - v. To the person playing the clergy/educator – what did you find most frustrating about your interaction?
    - vi. At what point were you the most unsure of what to do/say?
  - d. If time and desire permits, do the role play again with different people in each role
- 2. A second role play: A couple has been divorced for seven years. The husband is remarried and the wife is not. The husband wants his new wife to have an *aliyah* and the wife does not want the new wife involved in the ceremony in any way.
  - a. Once you have done the role play please think about the following questions
    - i. What are the underlying issues present in this case?
    - ii. What input, if any, should the couple's child have in this?
    - iii. Should there be a Temple policy on how to handle this situation or should it be handled on a case by case basis?
- 3. Closure (**15 min**)
  - b. Join together
  - c. Have everyone share one lesson they will take with them and try to use before the next class.
  - d. Encourage people to write down how they have used this technique and its results.



## Lesson Three: Using the Get for Ritual Closure

### Essential Questions:

1. How do our preconceived notions about divorce affect our views of divorce?
2. How can we use Jewish ritual to help people find closure from the relationship to their former spouse?

### Core Concept:

Learners will explore their feelings about divorce and Jewish views on divorce rituals in order to create their own ritual for congregants to use.

### Materials:

Big board or paper  
Journals  
Pens

### Activities:

1. Review from last session (**3 min/person**)
  - a. Have everyone share one thing that they remember from the last two session
  - b. Have all participants share one way in which they used a learning from the last sessions in their work.
2. Divorce as an ending (**10 min**)
  - a. The word divorce brings many thoughts and feelings to people's minds. To focus their thinking ask them to write down what they think of when they think about divorce as an ending.
  - b. Have people share what they wrote
  - c. Give others time to react to the original reactions
  - d. If this is being done in chevuta then once each person writes their reaction, have them swap papers and react to each other in writing.
3. Divorce Ritual (**30 min**)
  - a. Last session, participants learned the biblical and Talmudic texts that allow divorce. Once a couple has reached the decision to divorce, there are negotiations and legal proceedings in which they need to engage. Judaism also has a ritual divorce proceeding – a *Get*
    - i. Review the description of a *get* in Appendix A
  - b. The reform movement has had mixed feelings about enforcing the use of a *Get*
    - i. What do you think about this? What do you find to be good or bad about a *Get*? How could a *Get* be useful or unuseful?

1. Once participants give their response review the summary of the reform movements changing position in Appendix B
- c. When a couple comes in to plan their child's bar or bat mitzvah and there is conflict it may be because of unresolved issues from their marriage and divorce.
  - i. Leila Herman Perlmutter – a caseworker for *Jewish Board of Family and Children's Services* in New York says that one reason parents may not be able to come together for a child's Bar/Bat Mitzvah is because one spouse has a strong attachment to the other spouse.
    1. "Sometimes the attachment may be of unrequited love after having been abandoned by the former spouse. Sometimes the attachment was formed of hate, anger and disappointment for unmet needs."<sup>9</sup>
- d. Is there a way we can take this ritual and use it to help find closure for both sides?
  - i. What are some ways in which we can do this?
    1. With a partner take 10 minutes and brainstorm some ways we could use the *Get* ritual to help the couple find closure
- e. Some of the couples you encounter will have difficulties working together for their child's Bar/Bat Mitzvah because one or both of the partners still has unresolved feelings for/about the other partner.
  - i. The use of a ritual – either for one partner or for the both together, may give them the push they need to see past these feelings and cooperate for their child
4. Closure (**2 min/person**)
  - a. What did you learn that surprised you the most?
  - b. Encourage participants to write down how they have used the lessons from today in their work and to reflect on the success of these procedures
  - c. Point out to the participants that this ritual can be used around the time of a couple's divorce. Clergy do not need to wait for crisis to suggest the use of this ritual. In fact, it may be even more useful around a couple's divorce.
5. Hint to Next time
  - a. The child

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<sup>9</sup> Perlmutter, Leila Herman. "Coming of Age in Remarried Families: The Bar Mitzvah." *Journal of Jewish Communal Services*. Sept. 1982.

## Appendix A

### The *Get*

1. It must be written on paper that will not disintegrate and with ink that will last so that a woman can use it continuously to prove her status.<sup>10</sup>
2. The *Get* must be written by a scribe, usually in Aramaic, and with the explicit instruction and free-will consent of the husband.
3. The *Get* must be written for the dissolution of a specific marriage. It may not be written ahead of time with blanks left to be filled in at a later date.
4. The *Get* contains the names of the husband and wife, the date, the place and the words that the woman is now free to marry any man.
5. This text comes from M Gittin 9:3 where the *Get* is described as a “bill of divorce and release”
6. Traditionally the *Get* is written in twelve lines.
7. After the twelfth line it is signed by two witnesses.
8. The husband then hands the document to the wife in front of two witnesses.
9. At this time the couple is divorced by Jewish law.

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<sup>10</sup> Hauptman 107

## Appendix B

### The Reform Movement and the *Get*

The Reform Movement in the United States has had a mixed relationship with the *Get* document. Washofsky explains that in 1843 Samuel Holdheim proposed to discard with the religious divorce. He felt that divorce was an act of civil and monetary law and since “today we conduct our monetary affairs according to the civil laws of the states” and the states make provisions for civil divorce, Jews should use civil divorce.<sup>11</sup> This was adopted by the Reform Movement in 1869. In 1928 the following statement was appended to the *Rabbi’s Manuel* of the Central Conference of American Rabbis. It read:

The dissolution of marriage pronounced by a civil court, is also fully valid in the eyes of Judaism, if it can be ascertained from the judicial document that both parties consented to the divorce; where, however, the court issues a decree against one or the other part by constrain, Judaism recognizes the validity of the divorce then only, if the cause assigned is sufficient in conformity with the spirit of the Jewish religion. It is recommended, however, that the officiating Rabbi, in rendering a decision, obtain the concurrence of competent colleagues<sup>12</sup>.

These reform leaders agreed with Holdheim. They did not feel the Jewish divorce document necessary. In addition, they found it demeaning to women. Rabbi David Einhorn spoke to the need to keep marriage Jewish. He wrote that “marriage is an act of sanctification that establishes a religious institution; divorce, by contrast, is the negation of the destruction of that sanctity”. He felt that religion had no positive role to play in the disillusion of a marriage.<sup>13</sup> Washofsky disagrees with this sentiment. He writes: “Divorce, to be sure, is not commonly regarded as a

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<sup>11</sup> Washofsky 168

<sup>12</sup> Mehlman, Rabbi Bernard H. and Rabbi Rifat Sonsino. A Reform Get: A proposal. *Journal of Reform Judaism*. Summer, 1983. 31-36

<sup>13</sup> Washofsky 168-169

blessing, something to be sanctified. Then again, neither is death, yet Judaism does not ignore death; rather, it fashions a response to the trauma of loss and bereavement drawn from the vast resources of our ritual and liturgical tradition. Divorce arguably belongs in the same category”.<sup>14</sup> Rabbis Mehlman and Sonsino agreed that the divorce should be a Jewish ritual and that it can be healing<sup>15</sup>.

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<sup>14</sup> Washofsky 169

<sup>15</sup> Mehlman 32

## Lesson Four: The Child

### Essential Questions:

1. How does the child of divorce feel when confronted with the possibility of seeing ones family all together again?

### Core Concepts:

Learners will explore the stories and drawings created by children of divorce in order to try to better understand their feelings and emotions about this subject.

### Activities:

1. Children's pictures (**20min**)
  - a. Put the pictures from appendix one on a table for all to see
    - i. Pass out paper and pens/pencils to all of the participants
    - ii. Have each participant write a caption for each picture
  - b. Put out the pictures with the captions (appendix two)
    - i. Have someone read the caption to the pictures aloud
    - ii. Have each participant write their reaction to the caption written for the picture
2. The True Story of a Bat Mitzvah Girl (**20 min**)

My parents divorced when I was four and half years old and my brother was six months. While my parents were amazing at co-parenting, my mother's extended family did not like my father and were not afraid to show their displeasure. My mothers's family is extremely loyal and protective. When someone hurts one member of the family, they have betrayed the entire clan. My grandfather would not say my father's name. My uncle would not let my cousin come and play at my dad's house. My aunt would not let my dad into her house when he would come to pick us up from holiday meals. I was a sensitive child and I noticed all of this. I also knew that for my Bat Mitzvah they would all be in the same room, together.

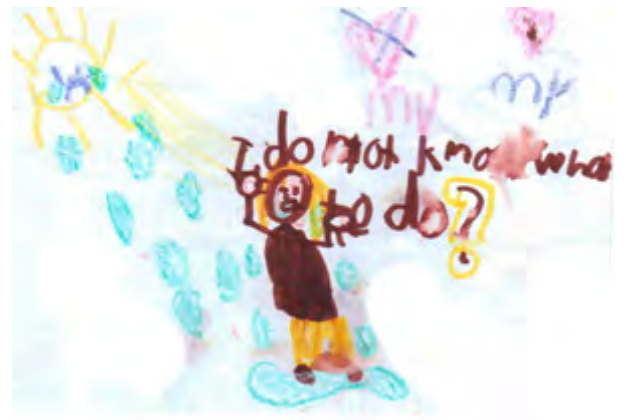
My parents divided the weekend. I would spend Shabbat dinner and the lunch after services with my mom. My dad would throw the party for my friends and have a brunch on Sunday. But the service, that was a time when everyone would have to be together.

This made me nervous so I sat my grandmother down (we are very close) and explained to her how her and my grandfather's treatment of my dad only hurt me and my brother. I asked her to please be nice to him for me and to ask my grandfather to do the same. She agreed and she understood.

The morning of my Bat Mitzvah, as I stood in the rabbi's office, before walking out to the Bema, I began to cry. I could not stop. I was so anxious about what was about to take place. About my entire family being in the same place together. The rabbis could not get me to stop crying. No one knew what to do. Eventually they began cracking jokes to make me laugh and I was able to walk out with them. No one knew what had occurred just minutes before the service began.

- a. Who are the key players in this scenario?
  - b. What do you think are the fears and anxieties of this girl?
  - c. What do you think the girl envisions she will see when she gets on the bema?
3. Scenario **(20 min)**
- a. You schedule a meeting with a Bar/Bat Mitzvah student who has divorced parents. It is about three weeks before the child's Bar/Bat Mitzvah. You know that the child is nervous about the upcoming event, but the child has not been able to articulate what exactly s/he is nervous about. You suspect that it has something to do with the child's family but are unsure.
    - i. What will you say to this child when s/he comes into your office?
    - ii. What questions will you ask?
    - iii. What stories or anecdotes will you use to put the child at ease to enable you to confront some of the child's possible fears and anxieties?
    - iv. What Jewish sources or rituals do you think could help her to express her feelings?
  - b. Try to use the ideas you developed in the coming weeks and keep a journal that tells of your success and failures.

## Appendix One





## Appendix Two

### Crossroads



A 10 year old boy portrays the bewilderment and torn allegiances he feels in the midst of his parents' divorce.

A painful choice — his mother draws him to the left fork of the road, his father to the right fork of the road. What should he do?

He explains:

“This is what divorce sometimes seems like to me. Sometimes I am on the road I don't want to be on. Sometimes I can't decide which road to go on. At times, I get confused!”

— *Avery, age 10*  
*Denver, Colorado*

### Two Sisters

A 7 year old girl shares her paralysis with her family's breakup | divorce. In a mixed collage of water colors and crayon, she asks - and at the same time declares: “I do not know what to do?”

Her world is flooded by the sun's tears which envelop her and forge a puddle at her feet. Two hearts hover over it all and she feels separation and loss with especially one of those hearts.

— *Sydney, age 7*



*Ft. Wayne, Indiana*



Her 4 year old sister, with crayons only, more simply shows a sad face with tears streaming over one side of her face, and perhaps a smiley face still in the picture on the other side.

— *Ashley, age 4*  
*Ft. Wayne, Indiana*

## Lesson Five: Negotiation the Family

### Essential Questions:

1. How can a clergy member or educator help a family to negotiate bestowing honors on the many family members?
2. How can a clergy member or educator help parents to give honors to important people in the child's life even if this angers a parent?

### Core Concept:

By having to simulate decisions that parents and children of divorce need to make, learners will begin to understand the intricate relationships in divorced and blended families that these members need to navigate.

### Activities:

1. Text Study (**20 min**)
  - a. Genesis 21:9-14 – Hagar and Ishmael are sent away
    - i. What can this text teach us about different loyalties in a family?
    - ii. What can this text teach us about the family of origin and their feelings toward each other?
2. Seating and Honors (**20 min**)
  - a. Give each participant a list of the following family members
    - i. Mom's parents
    - ii. Dad's parents
    - iii. Step-mother
    - iv. Step-mothers parents
    - v. Step-siblings - 2
    - vi. Full sibling
    - vii. Mom
    - viii. Dad
    - ix. Dad's brother
    - x. Dad's sister
    - xi. Mom's brother
    - xii. Step-mom's sister
  - b. Give each participant the role of either mother, father or child
  - c. Have the participants assign honors – dressing and undressing of the Torah, *aliyah*, passing of the Torah in a chain of tradition – and the seating arrangements from the perspective of each family member
  - d. Once the above has been completed have the participants share, in their character, the reasons they made the decisions they did
  - e. Then give each other participant, still in their character, a chance to react, question, debate before moving on to another presentation
3. Debrief (**20min**)

- a. What were the feelings and emotions of each of the characters?
- b. What were the things that were important to each of the characters?
- c. How might the child feel put in the middle of his/her parents in this situation?
- d. How can we help the family come to a consensus on who should be honored and how?

## Lesson Six: The Parents

### Core Concept

Throughout this process parents will have argued with each other and probably with their child. This lesson is to ensure that at the end the child knows that s/he is loved and the parents understand that this day is about their child and for their child.

### Activities:

1. What to fight over? **(5 min)**
  - a. Make a list – either individually or as a group – of all the things that you think divorced parents fight about during the Bar/Bat Mitzvah planning process
    - i. Examples – money, honors, time
  - b. Once you have made the above list, write next to each item the underlying emotion that may cause a fight over the topic. For example, fighting over when which parents has the child may be about a fear of being excluded.
2. How to help parents with their anger **(10 min)**
  - a. Help parents to identify the source of their anger
  - b. Brainstorm together ways that you may be able to help one or both parents to deal with their anger
  - c. If you need assistance try the below strategy suggested by Rabbi Netter
    - i. “Acknowledge the source of anger.
      1. Recognize that your anger comes from your hurt, your disappointment, your shame and embarrassment, your sense of loss, your grief.
      2. Recognize that your ex-spouses anger comes from the same place.
      3. Realize that the hurtful words being said are coming from someone who is in a lot of pain.
      4. Attack the issue, not the people.
      5. Engage in constructive disengagement. Remember that anger is one stage of a process.
      6. Knowing that the unpleasantness of anger is not forever makes it easier to endure.”<sup>16</sup>
  - d. Remind parents that fighting is natural both during and after marriage, but that they can help their children tremendously if they are able to resolve their conflict with their ex-spouse.
    - i. “For children to see their parents argue and then work out a resolution to their conflict is very healthy for them. An important life skill for parents to model is how to resolve disputes in a way that is respectful, dignified, equitable and just.”<sup>17</sup>
3. It is really about the child **(10 min)**

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<sup>16</sup> Rabbi Perry Netter. *Divorce as a Mitzvah*. Jewish Lights. Woodstock: Vermont. 2002. 93-95

<sup>17</sup> Netter. 41

- a. Share the following quote: “There are three equal partners in the birth of a child, our sages insist: the father, the mother and God. Each partner has a role to play in the creation of life. Each makes a contribution to the uniqueness of the child; each has responsibility to raise this child.”<sup>18</sup>
  - i. How could this quote help a parent to refocus his/her priorities?
  - ii. What questions could you ask a parent to help them refocus on the child?
- 1. Some Suggestions
  - a. Why is it important to you that your child receive a Bar/Bat Mitzvah
  - b. Do you think it is important to your child to have their other parent involved? Why?
  - c. What do you want your child to learn about you during this process?
  - d. What do you want to convey to your child about your relationship with your child during this process?
  - e. How do you think your child feels seeing you and his/her other parent fight because of an event for him/her?
- 4. Ritual (**20 min**)
  - a. Create a ritual that you could use to help a parent reframe their energies so that they focus on their child and not on their ex-spouse
  - b. The ritual should end with something the parent can present or say to their child, before the day of the child’s Bar/Bat Mitzvah to help ease some of the child’s anxieties
  - c. Use what you learned about the child and parent in previous lessons
- 5. Share (**5 min/person**)
  - a. Take time to share what you have written with others in your group and receive feedback
- 6. Conclusion (**5 min**)
  - a. Thank you for participating in this series on counseling divorced and blended families. I hope that you have gained much from your work and will continue to explore ways to help these families through difficult times
  - b. Please consult the list of resources to help with further endeavors. Please be sure to find a social worker or psychologist with whom you are comfortable to continue to speak!

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<sup>18</sup> Netter. 62

## Resources

### Jewish Family Services

Many cities have their own chapter of this organization. Please find the one that is closest to your synagogue.

### The Union For Reform Judaism

The URJ has a section on marriage and divorce that may be useful. The website is:  
<http://urj.org/life/family/marriage/>

### Books

*Psychological Issues in Biblical Lore: Explorations in the Old Testament* by Albert I. Rabin

*Bar/Bat Mitzvah Basics, 2nd Ed: A Practical Family Guide to Coming of Age Together.*  
Edited by Cantor Helen Leneman . Foreword by Rabbi Jeffrey K. Salkin

*The Truth About Children and Divorce: Dealing with the Emotions So You and Your Children Can Thrive* by Robert Emery

*Between Two Worlds: The Inner Lives of Children of Divorce* by Elizabeth Marquardt

## Annotated Bibliography

Blitstein, Sheldon. "The Bar Mitzvah as an Experience in Family Growth." *Journal of Jewish Communal Service*. Sept 1982.

The author understands that "rites of passage are usually associated with emotionally critical moments" and therefore explores the difficulties that may arise in family systems during a Bar Mitzvah. The author follows three families through the Bar/Bat Mitzvah process. These three families confront the process with a family problem that may keep them from having a successful and meaningful *simcha*. Through counseling these families are able to overcome obstacles and have meaningful experiences. The author not only explores family dynamics and systems, but also explains the changes that occur in students during adolescence.

Hauptman, Judith. *Rereading the Rabbis: A Woman's Voice*. Westview. Hauptman. 1998.

In her book Hauptman looks at the laws and commentaries of the rabbis from a woman's perspective. She uncovers what their rulings meant to women of that time and today. In her chapter on divorce, she focuses on the views Rabbi Shammai, Hillel and Akiva have on the reasons one can divorce. It troubles her that each rabbi seems to make it easier for a man to divorce his wife. Hauptman notes that it is tempting to compare marriage to slavery, but says that this is inaccurate. She recognizes that woman did have more freedom than slaves.

Netter, Rabbi Perry. *Divorce as a Mitzvah*. Jewish Lights. Woodstock: Vermont. 2002.

The author begins the book by discussing family relationships and comparing them to relationships we find in the Torah. He examines Isaac and Rebecca's attraction to each other as well as King David's infidelities. Netter continues by discussing the role that God plays in the marriage of two people and their family life. He also compares God to a spouse who was cheated on and found the ability to forgive. After setting the social-emotional stage for divorce, Netter describes the Jewish legal ramifications of divorce. He gives the Torah and Talmud text that allow divorce. Lastly, Netter discusses ways to help angry spouses to explore their feelings and parents to continue to parent their children together.

Perlmutter, Leila Herman. "Coming of Age in Remarried Families: The Bar Mitzvah." *Journal of Jewish Communal Services*. Sept. 1982.

In this article the author identifies four dynamics in families that would make it difficult for them to come together for a child's Bar/Bat Mitzvah. These include the inability of parents to work

together, the inability of one or both parents to feel fully divorced, parents use of child to communicate with each other, and “divided loyalties which keep the child from being able to please both his natural parents at any given time”. The author explores the types of counseling that are helpful in each of these situations. The goal of the author is to make the ceremony as joyous as possible for these families. Sometimes, she found, this means separate ceremonies and other times the families are able to come together.

Schein, Rabbi Jeffery and Susan Wyner. “Mediating the Tensions of Bar/Bat Mitzvah: The Cleveland Experience”. *Journal of Jewish Communal Service*. Spring 1996

This article describes a task force that was formed by clergy and educators in Cleveland in response to lavish Bar/Bat Mitzvah parties. The task force wanted to refocus the Bar and Bat Mitzvah processes to the religious meaning and mitzvot that could be performed. They faced challenges because the majority of Bar/Bat Mitzvah families wanted their parties. While there is some sense that families tried to “keep up with each other”, for most, this was how they took control of a religious ceremony from which they otherwise felt isolated. The committee was successful in adding components to the educational program of religious schools, but not in changing the party culture.

Seltzer, Rabbi Sanford. *When there is no other Alternative: A Spiritual Guide for Jewish Couples Contemplating Divorce*. UAHC: New York. 2000

Rabbi Seltzer confronts the issue of stigmas associated with divorce in his book. He discusses the importance of helping families, especially teenagers, feel their families are accepted in the synagogue.

Washofsky, Mark. *Jewish Living: A Guide to Contemporary Reform Practice*. URJ Press. New York: Mark Washofsky. 2010

Mark Washofsky begins his book by giving the biblical verse that discusses divorce and the Talmudic sources that expand on this. He continues by discussing the Reform movement’s view on divorce and the *get* or ritual divorce. Since the reform movement accepts civil divorce many early reform rabbis did not feel it was necessary to require a *get*. Washofsky disagrees, feeling that a *get* may bring closure to a couple in a way that a civil divorce cannot. Washofsky also raises the issue of whether or not a reform rabbi should require a formally observant member of a couple to have a *get* before agreeing to perform a remarriage.